

1995

Report, 1994-95: New England Region

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Recommended Citation

Morry, Matthew F. (1995) "Report, 1994-95: New England Region," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 46, Article 17.
Available at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol46/iss1/17

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REPORT, 1994-95: NEW ENGLAND REGION

The New England Region of the Mariological Society of America held its Annual Meeting on Saturday, October 22, 1994, at Providence College, Providence, R.I. The meeting was called to order at 10:00 A.M. by the director, Fr. Matthew Morry, O.P., S.T.D., D.D. The Very Reverend Philip A. Smith, O.P., Ph.D., President of Providence College, warmly welcomed the 135 members present and brought the greetings of the College. Fr. Morry then introduced the Keynote Speaker, Rev. Paul Mouawad of the St. Maron Maronite Rite Diocese.

In the Keynote Address, "Mary in the Eastern Churches," Fr. Mouawad noted that while some would consider Christian Tradition as embracing the two branches of Greek East (Greek, Russian and other Orthodox churches) and Latin West (Roman Catholic and other Reformed churches), such a bipartite division is inadequate; for, it neglects a third and distinct component—the Christian Orient-East and, in particular, the churches of Syriac liturgical tradition (the Maronite, Syriac Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, Chaldean). It is out of this third Tradition that Fr. Mouawad considered the devotion to Mary of the Syriac East.

There is a distinctive contribution made by the early Syriac Fathers who represent in their writings a genuine Semitic form of Christianity, not yet heavily hellenized. Their understanding of the world around them, their thought patterns are still essentially biblical. For them, the mystery of the Incarnation cannot be reduced to the restraints of definitions. Rather, they express this mystery with the language of paradox, metaphor and symbol. The proper vehicle for this kind of theology is not prose but poetry, as expressed with brilliance, for example, in the works of St. Ephrem (306-373).

Taking its distinctive shape from the theological and artistic creativity of Syriac, the Maronite Church offers a rich and vibrant theology of Mary as the one who sums up the whole Church. Mary testifies to the accomplishments of Christ. She is a woman of faith and model of peace. Her life offers us the example of true Christian faith: she cooperates with God in her pregnancy, in the childbirth experienced in poverty; she tolerates the uprooting from her Nazareth home, ponders the perplexing words of Simeon, reflects on the response of her twelve-year-old son in the Temple, suffers in his anguish on the Cross, celebrates the joy of his Resurrection, and rejoices with the disciples at Pentecost. Indeed, Mary conceived Christ in her heart, long before she conceived him in her womb. In the Maronite Church, Mary is like a beautiful icon which is portrayed by the creative brush strokes of the Sacred Scriptures, for example, in the Old Testament passage: "You are the ark of Noah, the offering of Melchizedech, the field of Isaac, the ladder of Jacob, the vessel of manna, and the rock of Samuel."

Before the Council of Ephesus, in the East there was already a feast of the Holy Virgin entitled the Divine Motherhood of Mary. The Syriac Church reflects her devotion to the Mother of God during the Eucharistic Liturgy: through many prayers and rev-

erences to Mary. She commemorates Mary *after* her Son is present on the altar. So, Mary's Motherhood is remembered and her virginity is affirmed as she is the "Sealed Letter" in whom the Lord lived, whom the Holy Spirit sanctified. In the *Anaphora of Sharar*, the liturgy celebrating the Dormition of Mary is the center of the spiritual life in the Eastern churches.

Mary is identified in great intimacy with the Holy Trinity. During the fifth and sixth centuries in Syria, the following message was printed on the walls in the village of Deir-Seetah: IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, THE SON, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, AND THE MOTHER OF GOD. This carving did not intend to place Mary as an equal to the Persons of the Trinity, but simply to exalt her because of her Divine Maternity. In the innumerable feasts commemorated in the Maronite Rite churches in a very loving and devout manner, the faithful are always inspired to raise their voices in glorious chant: "O Blessed Mother of God, dwelling-place of Divinity, temple of the Creator, tabernacle of the Word, you are the glory of all the faithful" (Praises of the Mother of God).

Following the Keynote Address, Fr. Mouawad made a video presentation on the Marian devotion of the Eastern churches, exemplified in the Icons. A discussion accompanied this presentation, after which a Marian liturgy was held in the Rosary Chapel of the Priory of St. Thomas Aquinas. The Liturgy in the Maronite Rite was also celebrated by Fr. Paul Mouawad, assisted by the Maronite Church Choir of St. George Maronite Church.

The Reverend G. Adrian Dabash, O.P., a professor of art at Providence College, delivered the homily—"Mary, the Icon of the Church"—with visual offering. Fr. Dabash observed that when God the Father decided to send his Son into our world, the entry of Jesus went far beyond the re-establishment of a bond between God and his people: It was to be a New Covenant between God and us. (Note: God had already formed us in his own image and likeness, so we were already icons of God. Jesus came, then, not to change the icon, but to change its symbolism.) Jesus the Christ became man through Mary and the love of the Holy Spirit. Jesus established the Church with his Mother, Mary, now as Mother of the Church. Mary is the Icon of the Church *par excellence*. She is the first to give us the Sacrament of our Salvation, by her participation in the Incarnation of Jesus.

Art communicates this intimate relationship of Mary-Jesus-the Church. In the Icons, we encounter Mary at the Annunciation; then, as she rushes to visit her cousin Elizabeth; at the birth of Jesus; at the foot of the Cross. The Icons also bring us with Mary to the Upper Room in Jerusalem, in the midst of the disciples. Once again, Christ comes into the world in a new and powerful way through the Holy Spirit. The Icon for this event presents Mary as the Mother of the Descent of the Spirit of Christ upon the Church. There are three principal images which symbolize and reveal her role as True Icon of the Church: 1) she is *wider than the heavens*—Mary is the Mother of God, and she contains him who is wider than the heavens; 2) *she points to Christ who is the Way*; 3) *she is the loving kindness*—she is cheek-to-cheek with Christ, and their love for one another goes forth to all who look upon this image.

At the conclusion of the Liturgy, the attendees assembled for lunch in the dining room of the Priory of St. Thomas Aquinas, with the Very Reverend H. Justin Hennessey, O.P., as host. Fr. Morry conducted the business meeting; he reported on the national meeting of the Mariological Society of America in New Orleans. Fr. Morry also

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noted that due to an increase in the volume of inquiries relative to reports of "apparitions" of Mary, consideration would be given to a possible meeting in the Spring to discuss and clarify the notion of apparitions and the norms/criteria for evaluating such phenomena. The meeting adjourned at 2:45 P.M.

Matthew F. Morry, O.P.
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